

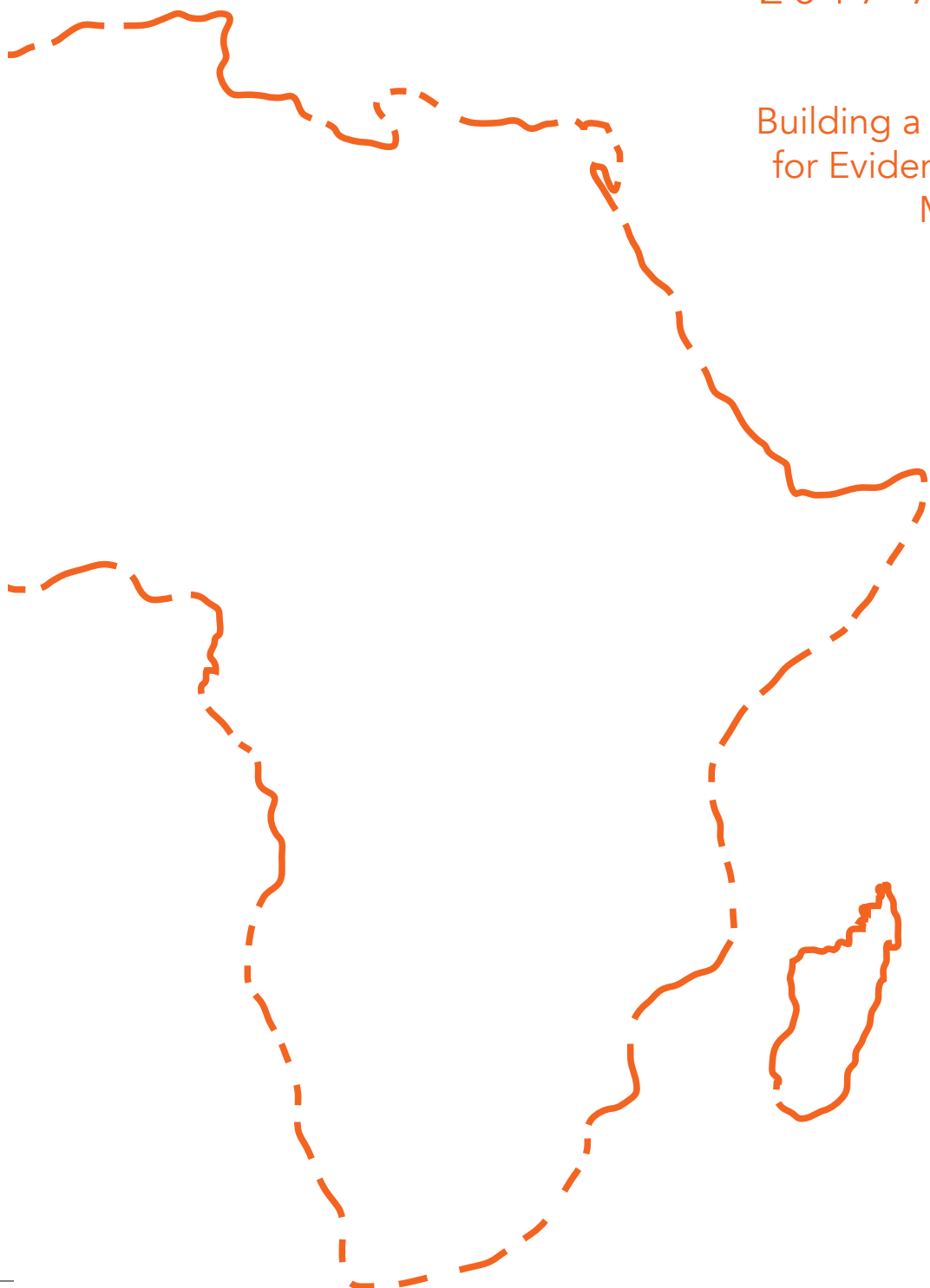


Africa Evidence Network Roadmap

2017 AND BEYOND

Building a Community of Practice
for Evidence-Informed Decision-
Making (EIDM) in Africa

NOVEMBER 2016







HOW THE AFRICA EVIDENCE NETWORK WAS BORN

The Africa Evidence Network (AEN) was conceived in December 2012 following a mini-colloquium in Dhaka, Bangladesh organised by 3ie and the Campbell Collaboration.

At this colloquium, a number of African delegates from various systematic review and evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) organisations had a meeting at which they agreed to form a network with the purpose of sharing information, experiences, and ideas on EIDM.

The AEN thus seeks to link up people and activities across various fields, initiatives and organisations working to produce and use evidence. In 2014, the Network received three years of funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) through the the University of Johannesburg-led programme to Build Capacity to Use Research Evidence (UJ-BCURE). UJ-BCURE was an initiative aimed at enhancing the use of evidence in the governments of South Africa and Malawi through mentorship programmes and practical EIDM workshops. In the same year, the AEN was officially founded by 23 members with the aim of facilitating connections between EIDM practitioners in Africa with one another and with the wider EIDM field. The AEN secretariat currently resides in the University of Johannesburg within the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE).

BUILDING OUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The activities undertaken by the AEN are all focussed on facilitating a connection between EIDM practitioners in Africa, and with the world of EIDM internationally.

The AEN's objective is to grow a community of practice on the continent that acts as a conduit for improved EIDM in Africa. The AEN achieves this aim by being a mechanism through which producers and users of evidence can connect, communicate, and collaborate. The Network achieves this role through a variety of activities:

EIDM EVENTS

In November 2014 (25-28 November), the AEN hosted its **first ever colloquium** in Johannesburg which brought together the EIDM community from Africa and beyond. It served to pay testimony to the growing appetite and demand for evidence, and to connect producers and users of such evidence. In 2016 the AEN partnered with various other African organisations in Zimbabwe, Malawi, and South Africa to host roadshows: these were small-scale events where both the AEN and hosting partners showcased themselves and presented their work to individuals within the partner organisation's network who were not necessarily AEN members. In September 2016 (20-23 September), the AEN hosted its second **biennial Evidence conference, Evidence 2016**, which was attended by members of the Network from across 34 countries. Apart from Evidence 2016, the AEN also co-hosts Evidence+ events – smaller-scale events which will take place across the continent in the years between the biennial Evidence conferences. These events are country-focussed allowing for more focussed discussion and continued engagement between evidence producers and users throughout the continent. In 2017, the AEN plans to co-host the first Evidence+ event in Kampala, Uganda in collaboration with the University of Makerere.

EIDM CAPACITY-SHARING

From its inception, the AEN has attempted to support capacity-sharing in EIDM by making freely available resources on evidence synthesis and EIDM from other capacity-building programmes. The Network website hosts a database of over 400 capacity-building resources which all members of the AEN are able to access. Additionally, members can access presentations that cover topics ranging from 'Accessing Evidence' to 'Integrating Evidence', and members are invited to submit content regarding their own capacity-sharing work to the AEN.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The Network actively shares knowledge about initiatives, events, activities, research, funding calls, and job openings in the EIDM field both from within Africa and across the globe in a newsletter that is emailed monthly to members. In addition to this newsletter, the Network shares blog posts throughout the month featuring stories that can include the work of AEN members as well as work as organisations external to the Network. The knowledge sharing role of the AEN takes a variety of forms, including producing films on EIDM and landscape maps that highlight the EIDM work active on the continent.

FOSTERING A COMMUNITY OF EIDM PRACTICE

Underlying all of the roles and activities of the AEN is the growth of a community of practice in EIDM in Africa. Formal activities such as the biennial Evidence conference and Evidence+ events are designed to give members opportunities to network with one another and connect with individuals and organisations active in the EIDM field. Other products such as the member and EIDM initiatives databases allow the AEN to connect individuals and organisations with one another without these having to be in the same place.

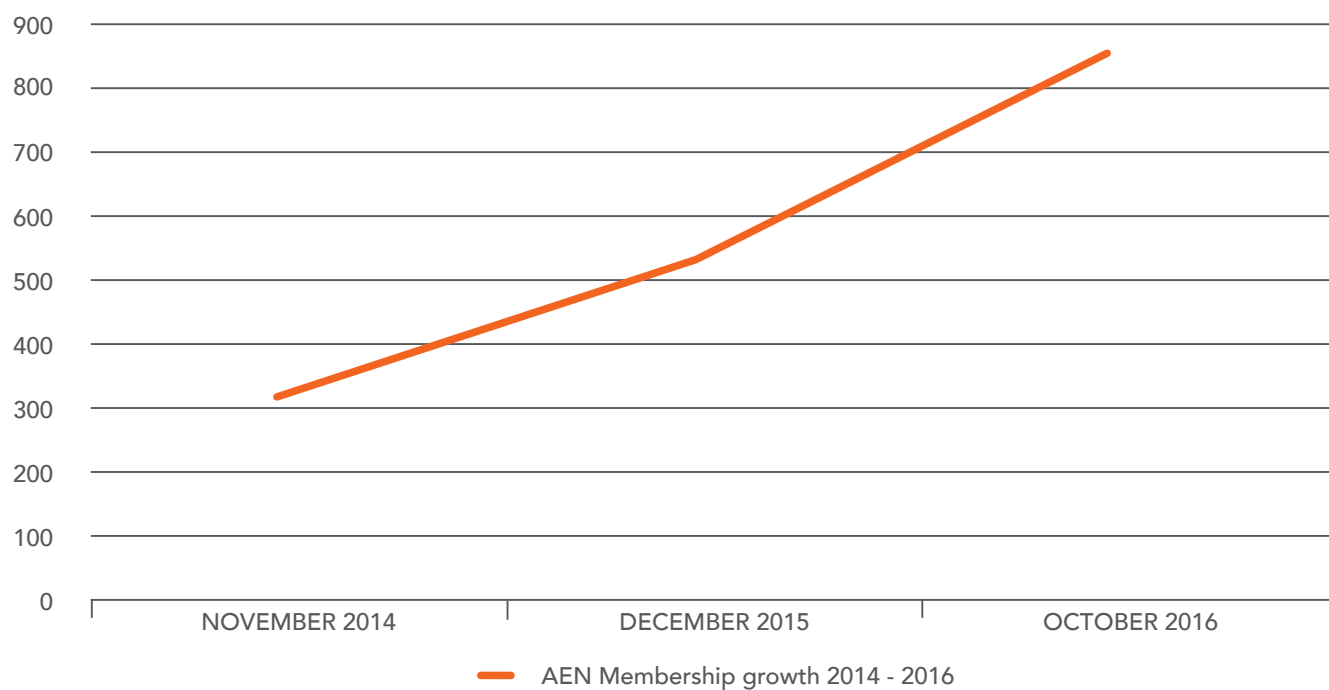


THE AEN IS GROWING

Since being founded, the AEN has grown to a total of 855 members across the globe¹.

Figure 1 below shows the consistent growth of the Network from 2014 until 2016.

FIGURE 1: AEN MEMBERSHIP GROWTH 2014 - 2016



¹ Membership numbers as of October 2016.

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM OF THE AEN

From 2014 to 2016, the activities of the AEN were funded as part of the UJ-BCURE programme by DFID. As the UJ-BCURE funding draws to a close, it is necessary to consider how the AEN will sustain its existence without donor funding.

This aim is important so that the AEN continues to grow and service the EIDM community, particularly in Africa. To answer how the AEN will sustain its existence without donor funding, three things are necessary to achieve:

1. The AEN needs to get the balance right between its size and range of services, and the available capacity of financial and human resources. To achieve this balance the AEN must understand what existing services it needs to sustain, what new services and products it should offer, and what form (size and administrative structure) it can afford to take.
2. The AEN must plan how these services will be funded. Obtaining funding for its services requires that the Network develops and implements funding plans and approaches potential funders with these. A thorough understanding of the brand and products of the AEN is fundamental to securing funding.
3. The AEN needs to promote itself and its affiliated products and services. This promotion should happen on two different levels. First, the Network should be promoted to the current membership in order to encourage the current members to participate more actively by using the services the AEN offers. More active engagement from current members would further embed the AEN within the current EIDM practice of its members. The second level of promoting the AEN will help grow the membership-base moving forward. The growth of new members is fundamental if the AEN is to sustain its activities and existence because it ensures that there is an ever-increasing target audience to purchase the products of and participate in the Network.

Fundamental to the three above activities is a clear goal and mission of the AEN to guide its future activities. The following section will describe the methods undertaken to gather the data that informs this report on the sustainability of the AEN, before delving into the findings and recommendations around how to sustain the AEN moving forward.



THE AEN HAS GATHERED EVIDENCE

This AEN roadmap that reports on the sustainability of the Network draws on multiple datasets collected using a variety of different tools, namely: an online membership survey and social network analysis of the AEN, in-depth interviews with a sample of survey respondents, and in-depth interviews with key informants. Following is a brief description of the datasets informing this report.

The purpose of the membership survey was to understand the demographics of current AEN members², gain insight into service-use among Network members, and understand the value that members gain from being part of the AEN. The survey questions were designed by the members of the UJ-BCURE team and were administered online through the conference organisers of Evidence 2016 in May 2016. The social network analysis questions were included as part of the survey and aimed to assess the level of connectedness both between members of the AEN and the levels of connectedness between Network members and those outside the AEN.

The membership interviews were intended to gather more in-depth feedback from members about how they had benefited from their membership to the AEN to showcase the difference the AEN has made in terms of supporting EIDM on the continent: these 40 interviews participants were selectively sampled³ from the survey respondents. We divided respondents up into three groups: those who work in the government sector, those who work in the research sector, and those who work in 'other' sectors (these would include members who work in NGOs). We also distributed the sample across the following geographic regions as far as possible: South Africa, Malawi, Zimbabwe, other African countries, outside Africa⁴.

Snowball sampling based on suggestions from the UJ-BCURE team and the UJ-BCURE Steering Committee was used to identify key informants who had experience of either running or being part of successful networks for the semi-structured key informant interviews. The main aim of the key informant interviews was to gather participants' experiences of and insight into sustaining a network without donor funding. Questions were adapted to each participant because the final sample of interviewees had varying expertise regarding sustaining networks; the questions asked were guided closely by the overall objectives set out for the AEN roadmap to address.

Using thematic analysis across these datasets, a framework of sub-themes was identified and grouped into broader themes that cut across the various datasets. These themes were then used to develop recommendations regarding sustainability of the AEN.

Two limitations in the data collection for this roadmap are mentioned here: the response rate and question design. Firstly, the response rate of the survey was low (148 out of over 600 members at the time responded to the survey), which affects the generalisability of the social network analysis. One possible reason for this is the fact that AEN members in Africa may have experienced unstable internet connections or limited data to participate in the online survey; this is a factor that should be considered when designing future surveys. The second limitation of the data collection methods was that the participants in the membership interviews reported feeling that the questions were repetitive. Although deliberately designed to build on questions already asked in the survey so as to probe deeper into members' thoughts, careful balance needs to be maintained in future between probing for fuller explanations and making the interviewees feel they are answering the same questions.

² For this information, please see the Africa Evidence Network Survey Report, available on the AEN website via <http://www.africaevidencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/AEN-Survey-Report.pdf>.

³ To reflect the funder's interest in gender distribution, we sampled an equal proportion of men as women.

⁴ The reasons for selecting Malawi and South Africa explicitly were that these were countries in which the activities of UJ-BCURE were based. Zimbabwe was explicitly selected because of the roadshow that took place there in 2016. The following categories were unrepresented in the final set of completed interviews: a male government official from Zimbabwe, a female government official from Malawi, a female government official from South Africa, a male government official from outside of Africa, a male researcher from Malawi, a male researcher from South Africa, and a male from outside of Africa working in the 'other' category.

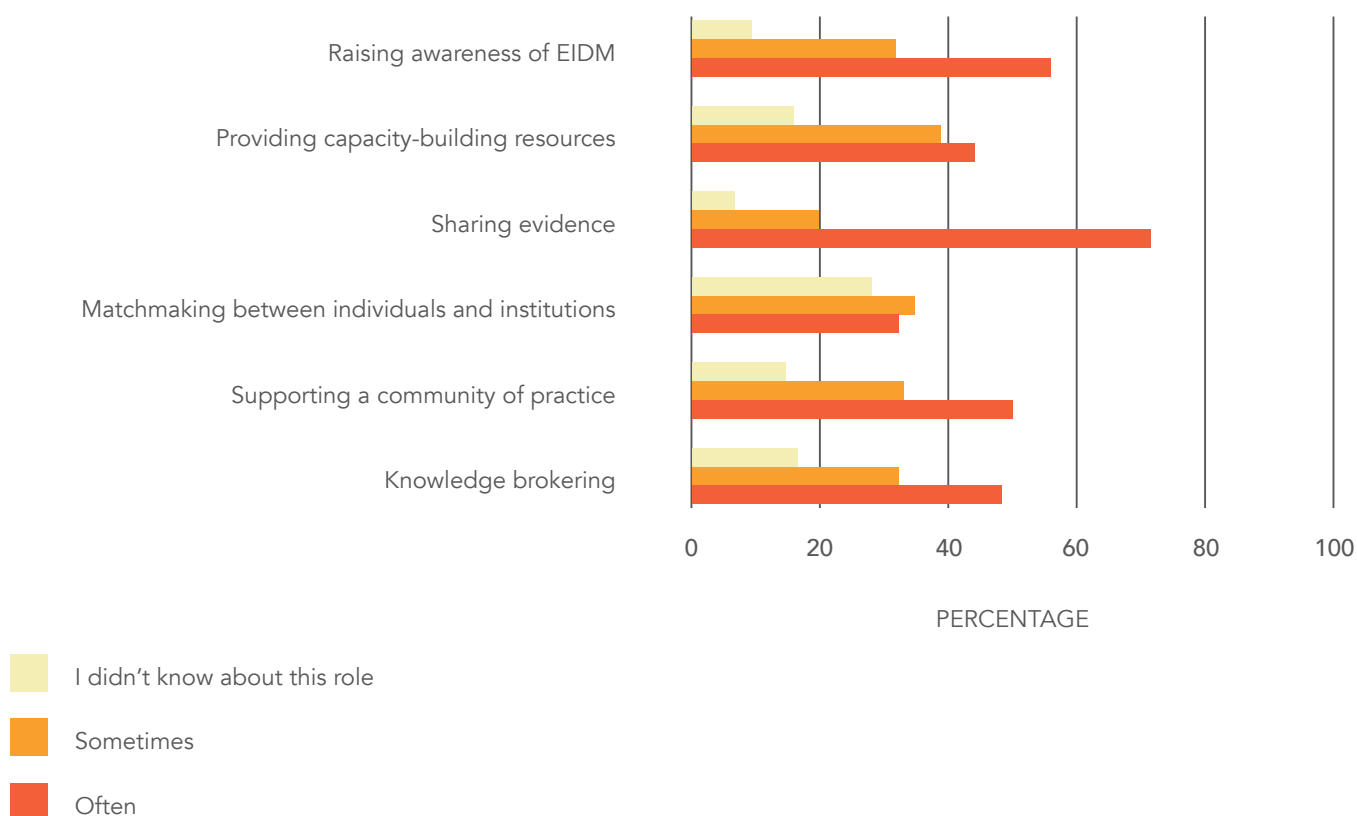
THIS IS WHAT THE AEN LEARNED

The various findings of the membership survey, social network analysis, membership interviews, and key informant interviews are briefly outlined below; these are used to develop recommendations for how to sustain the AEN.

MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

When members were asked about what they saw as the role that the AEN most often fulfilled, the most common answers were that the AEN's role was most often to share evidence, raise awareness of EIDM, and support a community of EIDM practice (Figure 2 presents the specific roles and extent to which respondents feel the AEN fulfils these). To get a sense of service use by members, respondents were asked to indicate which services they had made most use of in the last 12 months: these services included the newsletter (69% of respondents) and the website (37% of respondents). The least made-use-of service was the various social media platforms of the AEN⁵.

FIGURE 2: THE EXTENT TO WHICH MEMBERS FEEL THE AEN FULFILLS VARIOUS ROLES (N = 148) (%)

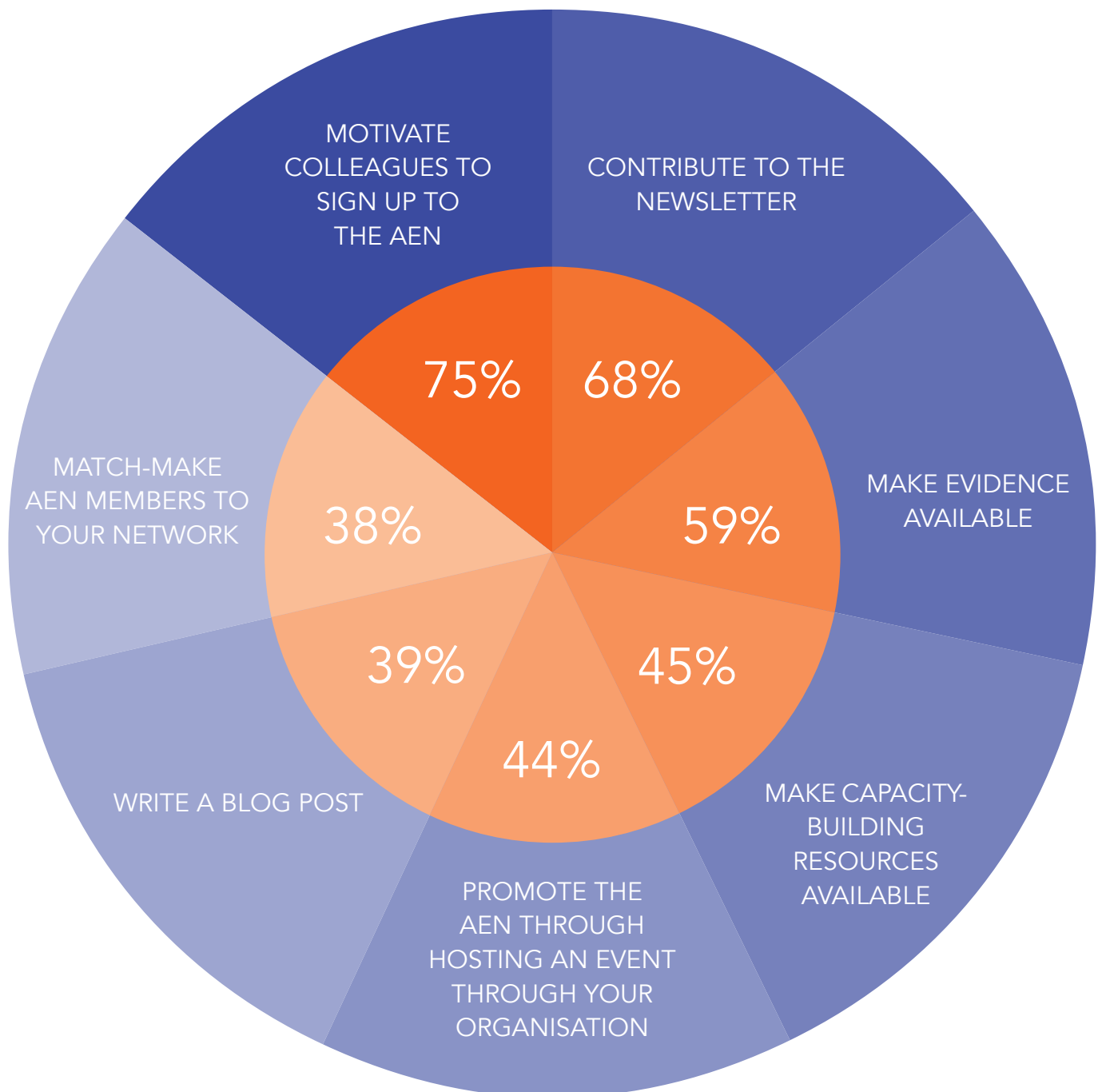


⁵ Fifty-four percent of respondents have not used the AEN LinkedIn page in the last 12 months, while the percentage of respondents who have not engaged with the AEN Twitter page, YouTube channel, or the AEN blog posts in the last 12 months are 52%, 51%, and 46% respectively.

⁶ US dollars

Overwhelmingly, three-quarters of the Network members who responded to the survey reported feeling that their membership to the AEN had been valuable, commonly citing at least one of three reasons for finding AEN membership valuable: 1) networking with peers within the EIDM field, 2) engaging in peer-to-peer learning, and 3) keeping up-to-date with the latest EIDM developments and events, regionally and across the globe. Almost half of the members who responded to the survey would be willing to pay a membership fee for the current form of the AEN; the calculated average fee came out to \$39⁶ annually. Members were asked what – if any – activities they would participate in to sustain the AEN; Figure 3 shows the activities members can engage in and the percentage of respondents who would participate in each activity.

FIGURE 3: WAYS THAT MEMBERS WOULD PARTICIPATE IN AEN ACTIVITIES (N= 148)



SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

The social network analysis of the AEN illustrated how the Network acts as a network of many networks – it is not a homogeneous body but rather consists of many sub-components, and has been successful in bringing EIDM organisations and networks together. The AEN has greatly increased cohesion and compactness in the overall EIDM network / community of practice in Africa. This process – represented in Figures 4 and 5⁷ – seems to happen by connecting organisational clusters through linking key individuals representing different clusters with one another and has the effect of formalising and strengthening the links and ties between these organisations. The AEN is less effective in linking unconnected individuals to other members within the AEN⁸. This lack of engagement by some individuals provides the AEN with an opportunity to better understand its members, their needs, and how the Network may improve chances for these members to engage.

FIGURE 4: INTERACTION BETWEEN RESPONDENTS BEFORE JOINING THE AEN

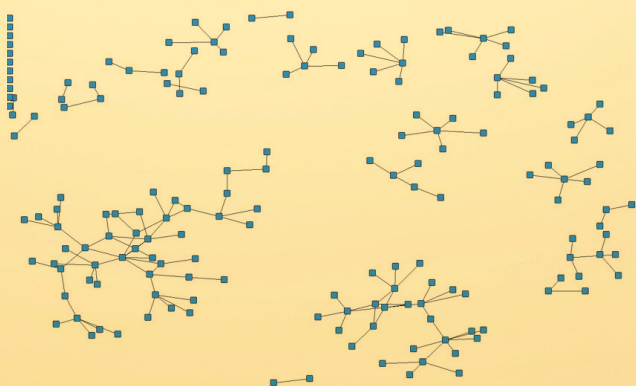
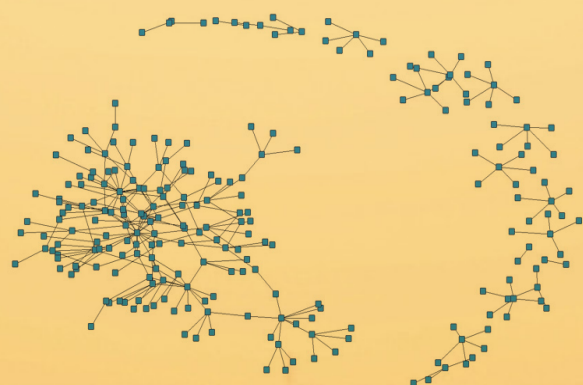


FIGURE 5: INTERACTION BETWEEN RESPONDENTS AFTER JOINING THE AEN



⁷ In Figures 4 and 5 each blue block represents a respondent, with the lines between each block representing a connection with another person.

⁸ A large number of individuals report no interactions with other AEN members.

MEMBERSHIP INTERVIEWS

A fuller discussion of the membership interviews' findings can be accessed through the AEN testimonials report (UJ-BCURE team 2016) where four themes around how the AEN membership has benefited respondents emanated from the membership testimonials.

First, members reported that the AEN helped them feel more connected to a wider EIDM community. This increased sense of community emphasised the importance of the AEN's newsletter since many respondents specifically pointed to that AEN product as increasing their sense of connection to the EIDM community. The second theme that came through the members' responses was that of the AEN enabling them to create and / or maintain connections to other practitioners in the EIDM field. The AEN was described as facilitating the establishment of contact with individuals from specific organisations; the various AEN events and membership database were seen as the mechanisms through which this contact and connection took place. Third, respondents stated that the AEN facilitated the enhancement of their EIDM capacities in various ways. Lastly, the AEN was identified as a mechanism that assisted members in changing their current practices to bring them more in line with EIDM principles. The AEN acted in this way by, for instance, exposing one member to different opportunities that had shifted the way she thought about doing her job. Figure 6 shows excerpts from membership interviews with each theme identified.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Interviews with key informants yielded a variety of common themes. The most common theme that arose from key informants' responses was ensuring that AEN services answer an existing demand from the membership. Many key informants used this as a starting point when asked what their advice for the AEN going forward would be. This theme is linked closely with another common theme among the key informants' responses which was the size and administrative nature of the AEN. Although many of the key informants differed in what they felt would be an ideal size and nature of the Network, they all agreed that what the AEN 'looks like' in times to come is dependent on what the membership wants from the AEN. Most key informants felt that the AEN need not try to be a large, formal body but that rather a local-level, decentralised network run by a core group of dedicated volunteers would be best.

Many key informants felt that the AEN may benefit from offering the membership interest groups in which they can interact with other members aligned to those same interests (e.g. EIDM in the health sector, EIDM for development, etc.). It was felt that offering members access to such groups could be a very useful service for the AEN to provide, and that grouping the AEN membership along interest group lines would also assist in identifying the different types of members the AEN has.

Some key informants suggested that the AEN consider dividing the membership into organisational and individual members. This division was suggested as a way to possibly request a membership fee from those in a position to pay one, while protecting the membership of those for whom a fee would be exclusionary. Similarly there were key informants who felt that it was imperative to understand the different 'types' of members, which would involve having in-depth understanding of a larger majority of the members' preferred services, the frequency with which they use those services, and the level at which they currently engage with the AEN.

Increased collaboration between the AEN and its organisational members emerged as a repetitive suggestion from key informants, with some key informants stating that increased collaboration between the AEN and similar organisations would assist the Network in continuing to achieve its remit. Key informants were of the view that the AEN was well-positioned to achieve a high level of collaboration because the Network is viewed as an EIDM advocate and an entity that breaks down the silos within EIDM.

FIGURE 6: EXCERPTS FROM MEMBERSHIP INTERVIEWS WITH EMANATING THEMES IDENTIFIED

THEME: CONNECTION

Male researcher from Uganda: I met public officials and ministers from my country at the colloquium. And now we work together and use evidence to inform policy. The AEN should continue what it is doing and continue providing opportunities, sharing information, and branding itself around bringing together different sectors: that is what is unique about the AEN. It brings together people from different stakeholders. ...Even among scientists there is a lack of understanding of synthesised research. I realised that what we need is a critical mass of scientists and knowledge brokers so that we can influence developments in the field. ...It is in that context that the AEN is so important. It facilitates collaboration for the building of this critical mass.

THEME: CAPACITY

Male government official from Zimbabwe: I am an economist in a research department [and am responsible for writing] policy briefs for our principles such as the secretary or the minister for presentation to forums such as Parliament. The AEN has gone a mile further in developing those skills that I use to produce the policy briefs and other reports. It has [had] a direct impact on my work. We were not trained to search for evidence on the internet. We had no idea of some of the search engines. And we did not know that we could check everything on the internet. ...We were also taught that not everything is useful information use... In terms of the format [and content] of the policy brief...[I now know] that...a policy brief should be short and that the brief should appeal to the recipient.

THEME: PRACTICES

Female practitioner from Kenya: On the capacity-building one, I was preparing material for one of the programmes that we are doing [and] I borrowed one or two statements from the capacity-building resources [on the AEN website]. I have learned from this material. And it has given me suggestions on how to do things.

THEME: CONNECTION

Female practitioner from Zimbabwe: At the AEN event in 2014...I met [a] good number of like-minded professionals [which] helped... expand my network

THEME: COMMUNITY

Female researcher in South Africa: I am at [a research institute] and I am constrained because we do not have a big team: we have small money and a small team. So just the existence of [the] Network is useful because we can bounce ideas off each other. That adds value...and builds up a movement and some kind of [EIDM] awareness. It 'beefs' me up without me having to get more capacity [at my research institute]. We don't do training here – we just have some seminars so it is useful for me to be able to say I was involved in an AEN event. It ties me into something bigger.

THEME: CONNECTION

Female practitioner from Kenya: I have used the website...to find opportunities in EDIM. So I learned about INASP through AEN.

WHAT OUR EVIDENCE TELLS US

Based on the findings across the datasets presented here, four themes relevant to the AEN and its sustainability are identified. These themes are 1) the responsiveness of AEN products; 2) the form of the AEN; 3) the needs of AEN members; and 4) the goal of the AEN.

THE AEN NEEDS MULTIPLE MEDIUMS TO MEET THE DIVERSE MEMBERSHIP NEEDS

The communication between the Network and the membership, predominantly through the newsletter, has been very successful. However, it is clear that members engage with the AEN in both active and passive ways. The AEN will need to continue to identify ways to interact with its membership using multiple mediums that respond to members' preferred method of interaction.

THE AEN SHOULD CONTINUE, AND INCREASE, ITS COLLABORATION WITH OTHER INITIATIVES AS THIS MAY CONTRIBUTE TO SUSTAINABILITY

In the context of sustaining activities without donor funding, the AEN is totally dependent on the membership's participation to continue its activities. It is unclear whether the membership are aware of this, or indeed what they think of this fact.

THE AEN SHOULD CONTINUE ITS 'FROM THE GROUND UP' NETWORK APPROACH

The shape that the Network should take came up either explicitly or was implied in findings across datasets. The elements under this theme that spanned across datasets included one suggested form for the AEN to take as being that of a local-scale, decentralised body with local chapters across Africa. Frequently, a core group of dedicated people who can run the Network were identified as the only 'structure' needed for the AEN to function provided there was demand for the services of the AEN. Supplementary to this, participants who believed this felt there is no need to think institutionally when deciding on what form the Network should take.

IT MAY BE TIME FOR THE AEN TO CONSIDER THE NEEDS OF SPECIFIC INTEREST GROUPS WITHIN EIDM

Another suggested change regarding the form of the AEN was to differentiate thematic areas for members to arrange themselves according to. The thinking behind this is so that members will be able to interact with other members inside their specific interest / focus area.

MEMBERSHIP FEES MAY GO AGAINST THE 'SPIRIT' OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Suggestions around AEN membership included dividing the membership up into individual-level membership and organisational-level membership, where institutions are asked to pay an annual membership fee but individual members are exempt from paying. The reason behind precluding individual members from paying a membership fee was that payment on an individual level may be perceived as potentially prohibitive of individual member participation. Furthermore, it was suggested that institutional members partnering with the AEN to cost-share on AEN activities or to collaborate on specific EIDM projects could sustain the AEN's activities.

THE AEN IS A VALUABLE NETWORK THAT SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE MEMBERSHIP

The value of belonging to the AEN was effectively established across all datasets: members gain much value from their membership to the AEN in terms of how the AEN facilitates a sense of community, increases connections, enhances capacity, and changes practices. A point was raised that the AEN needs to increase the promotion of itself and its activities both among members (to improve participation and sustain the AEN) and among new potential members (to grow the AEN).

THE OVERALL GOAL OF THE AEN SHOULD REMAIN TO BE A CHAMPION FOR EIDM ACROSS AFRICA

The goal of the AEN and what this should be came across implicitly across datasets: the main goal of the AEN was understood as sharing evidence as an intermediary between different groups within the EIDM sector. One participant took this further to state that the AEN's main goal is advocacy for EIDM and EIDM lesson-sharing.

BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE AEN

The themes provide the basis for the various recommendations pertinent to the sustainability of the AEN. The recommendations for the sustainability of the AEN are:

THE RESPONSIVENESS OF AEN PRODUCTS

1. The AEN should understand even better and more fully its members' use of its services in order to evaluate the current product and service offering in terms of those that would appeal to more active or more passive members.
2. Members of the AEN should be made more aware of their required participation to sustain the activities of the Network.
3. Continued and increased collaboration between the AEN and its members is recommended as a possible approach to ensuring sustainability.
4. The monthly newsletter offered by the AEN is a valued service / product and should be maintained.
5. The Evidence and Evidence+ events have been successful to activate EIDM knowledge-sharing and networking, as well as to formulate an African perspective on EIDM; these should be maintained.

THE FORM OF THE AEN

6. The AEN should maintain a local-level focus on countries within Africa and growing EIDM capacity on the continent, while maintaining the high levels of professionalism it has become respected for globally.
7. The AEN recognises the need to respond to specific sectors and special interest groups within EIDM.
8. The AEN should consider developing products and services that would be in demand by larger organisations.
9. The AEN should remain within the University of Johannesburg for the time being as it may prove challenging both in terms of time, human, and financial resources for another organisation to act as the AEN secretariat for now.

THE NEEDS OF THE AEN MEMBERSHIP

10. It is recommended that the AEN respond to the identified need for interest areas within AEN membership by introducing a mechanism for members to connect with others in their fields, while maintaining the cross-sectoral approach that is so characteristic of the Network.
11. A membership fee is not recommended at this point in time. If the AEN is to request an institutional membership fee, the AEN needs to consider what products and services it can offer in addition to the current offering from the AEN that organisations would be willing to pay for.
12. The AEN should explore additional or expanded products such as: an academic journal on EIDM in development; additional mentorship opportunities; and the expansion of EVIDENCE workshops, conferences and other learning engagements.

THE GOAL OF THE AEN

13. EIDM is a core skill for any professional, irrespective of their field. The AEN should recognise this and promote its existence as a mechanism that builds and enhances this skill.
14. The AEN is the champion for EIDM in Africa and should maintain knowledge-sharing and advocacy opportunities to maintain momentum on EIDM in Africa.

MOVING THE AEN FORWARD TOGETHER

Although the recommendations to sustain the AEN listed above lay out a roadmap for growing and continuing the success of the AEN, the Network cannot make this journey alone. It is dependent on its fellow travellers on the path of EIDM to participate in this adventure. It is only by drawing on our collective effort and strength that the Africa Evidence Network will continue to fulfil the EIDM needs of its members and enhance the capacity of EIDM in Africa

YOU CAN HELP MOVE THE AEN FORWARD

- **As a funder**, you can sponsor specific aspects of the AEN's growth.
- **As a related initiative in Africa**, you can engage with the AEN by contacting the coordinator Ms Precious Motha via pnmotha@uj.ac.za.
- **As a member**, you can play an active role in the Network by hosting EIDM-related events, contributing to content by writing newsletters or blog posts, and promoting the network to your professional connections outside the AEN.

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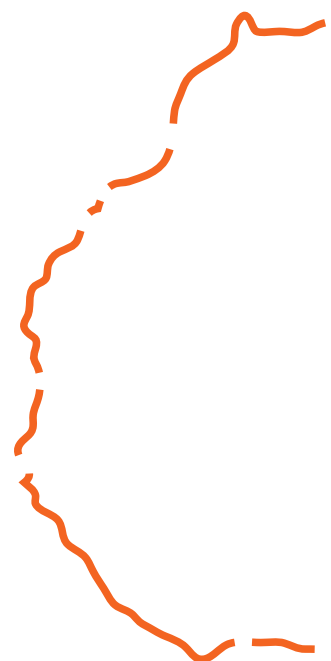
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